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AUTHOR Commeyras, Michelle
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ABSTRACT

Several informal studies investigating what teaching methods lead to developments in critical thinking skills among elementary and secondary students suggest that students themselves may be the best means for teaching students. A researcher and a second-grade teacher, reflecting on three years of collaborative research, found that students are intuitive and inventive when it comes to writing their own questions for exploring the meaning of stories they have read for class. When the teacher relinquished control over the class by allowing students to determine the direction of discussion, she found that their thinking was in-depth and penetrating. Analyses of discussion videos and transcripts revealed a myriad of ways in which student-generated questions promoted critical thinking among the second-grade students. For example, students considered different ways of wording a question; they looked at how the presence or absence of a single word could affect its meaning. A second study initiated by an eighth-grade teacher interested in how the second graders formulated their own questions involved a collaboration between the second- and eighth-grade students. The eighth-grade teacher involved her students in devising and planning ways of studying the second graders' thinking. Their ideas resulted in a host of literacy activities. Further, the enthusiasm and interest the two groups took in each other developed reciprocal and mutually meaningful relationships. (Contains 18 references.) (TB)

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A Newsletter of the National Reading Research Center

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May 1995

Tracing the Evolution of Research: From Critical Thinking to Literacy Partnerships

Michelle Commeyras University of Georgia (NRRC)

Whenever Georgiana Sumner and I get together, we marvel at what we learned from her second graders about student questioning during a yearlong exploratory research project we conducted in 1992/1993. In that project, we studied ways to conduct literature-based discussions that invite and support students' critical thinking and allow them to assume more responsibility during such discussions. We undertook this research because we agreed with the educational and governmental policy statements that identify critical thinking as a significant educational goal (American Federation of Teachers, 1985; Committee for Economic Development, 1985; Educational Policies Commission, 1961). We also recognized from our own teaching experiences and from an array of reports of classroom practices in the United States (Boyer, 1983; Goodlad, 1983) that there are too few opportunities for students to exercise their critical thinking in most classrooms. Furthermore, a 1988 report on the status of U.S. education confirmed that those students who found reading in school difficult were less likely to be receiving instructional experiences that emphasized comprehension and critical thinking because they were spending so much time on decoding skills (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1988). Given the paucity of research on critical thinking instruction (Nickerson, 1986), we set out to discover ways of promoting critical thinking in conjunction with reading that would involve all students regardless of their academic status as readers.

Now when Georgiana and I get together, it is with her sister, Johni Mathis, who teaches eighth grade Reading/Language Arts in a nearby middle school. The three of us have met every other month since August 1993 to talk about their cross-classroom research sponsored by the School Research Consortium (SRC). Georgiana and Johni are in their second year of studying how elementary and middle school literacy partnerships can provide a social context for students' reading, writing, and thinking. A distinctive feature of the cross-age partnerships is that second and eighth graders participate in discussions based on their own questions about children's literature (Commeyras & Sumner, 1994). This feature is the link between the original study on critical thinking and ongoing efforts to understand the significance of personal relationships in becoming increasingly literate. We believe that our three years of research are contributing to the NRRC's goal to conduct studies that discover what "fosters students' critical thinking" and what "promotes readers' engagement in literacy activities" (Alvermann & Guthrie, 1993). In this column, I will trace the evolution of our combined research endeavors to highlight ideas that are influencing our thinking about literacy education.

Student Questioning Promotes Critical Thinking

I think we pay more attention to the story when we get to make up the questions.
-Julie

You can't learn unless you ask questions.
-Wendell

These comments were made by students in Georgiana's class after they participated in 17 literature discussions where they posed and discussed their own questions about a story. Georgiana made the following comments after viewing videotapes and reading transcripts of these literature discussions.

> I like things to be open-ended. I like kids to be able to talk. When I listen to the tapes and read transcripts, I realize I like it even more open than I thought I did. The more I backed out of it, the better their discussions got. And I want to remember that. I don't want to go back, even though I thought it was okay before... It's just now I know that when they start discussing and when they're talking to each other and we're all sharing, they do get more in

Continued on page 2

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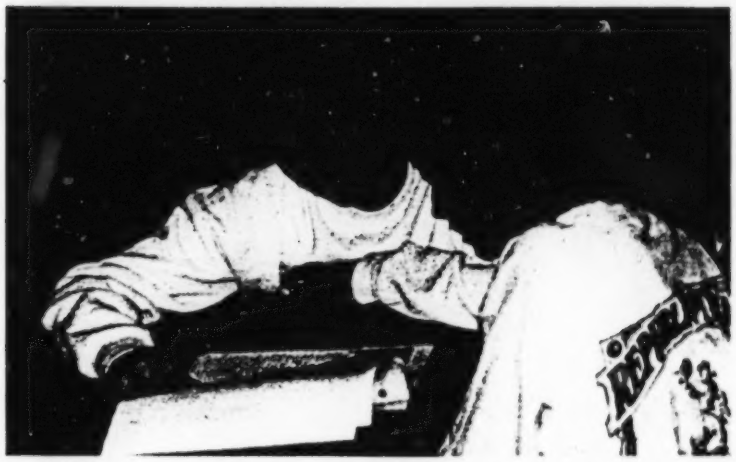
depth. The other thing I know is that they do go off on tangents and we don't know where they are going. The path I used to have in mind for them to go down and the place I wanted them to end up are not necessarily where they have any intention of going. And it's not [that] they're [saying], "I'm not going to do what she says." I think they just are thinking, which is the general idea, it's what we want them to do.

The openness and in-depth thinking that Georgiana refers to came about when we relinquished control over posing questions for discussion. We realized that it was not necessary to try to lead students to ask the kind of questions we thought promoted critical thinking. At first, we tried to get the second graders to pose questions that had at least two plausible conclusions and that focused on a major event in the story. By the second discussion where students posed and talked about their own questions, we began to see that a question that may not fit our notions of a good discussion question could lead to the kinds of thinking that are commonly held as educational ideas (Commeyras, 1994a).

Analyses of discussion videos and transcripts have revealed a myriad of ways in which student-generated questions promoted critical thinking among Georgiana's students (Commeyras, 1995). For example, students considered different ways of wording a question and how the presence or absence of a single word could lead to a subtle but significant shift in meaning. They used questions to understand story events and to speculate and explore reasons related to larger issues such as why some children's parents and relatives die. They also recognized that there can be a fine line between a productive difference of opinion that enlarges our thinking on a question and an argumentative difference that leads to defensive thinking. The students recognized that discussing their own questions made them think: "If they want people to think a whole lot, then this [the discussions based on student questioning] would be the opportunity for them [students] to do that" [Ashley].

Questioning as a Response to Literature

There are many stances and ways of responding to literature associated with reader response theories but questioning does not appear as a response category in Beach and Hynd's (1991) review of the literature. This lack of attention to questioning as a response or a stance toward reading seems curious given the ease with which Georgiana's second-grade students generated questions to discuss literature. The idea of questioning as an important response to reading is supported by Michel Meyer's (1994) alternative conception of reason known as problematology. In problematology, questioning rather than answering becomes the foundational principle, integrating "argumentation and logic, figurative and literal language, knowledge and literature, into one overall conception of thinking as it actually takes place, without favoring any specific ontology, nor any other preconceived, unquestioned, a priori norm of reason" (p. 4). Meyer's proposal that rationality begins with questions rather than with the adequacy of responses or attention to propositional chains of thought provides the philosophical basis for building a rationale for conceiving of reading as inherently about questioning. The second graders' questions were rich in information about what they were attending to, understanding or misunderstanding, and trying to make sense of. Their questioning stance toward literature was congruent with Meyer's view that active and inquisitive reading occurs when a text gives rise to new and different questions. The outcome of qualitatively analyzing student questions and their discussion of those questions led to proposing that questioning be viewed as an essential response to reading (Commeyras, 1995).



The Centrality of Relationships in Literacy Learning

The collaboration that Georgiana, Johni, and I embarked on in 1993/94 represented a move from university-initiated research to school-based research. The transfer of responsibility to Georgiana and Johni for defining research purposes, design, and methods was inspired and supported by the formulation of the School Research Consortium, a teacher research community established by the NRRC. The SRC is based on the premise that teacher inquiry is essential and viable because it provides teachers with opportunities to learn about teaching practices that enhance students' literacy development. My role in Georgiana and Johni's research has been to aid and assist them in whatever ways they deem important (i.e., videotaping and providing leadership when writing about the research).

Initially, we conceived of a cross-classroom study that would focus on students' thinking because we wanted to continue to study student questioning in literature-based discussions. Georgiana wanted to study how transcripts of second graders discussing their own questions about literature would inform her thinking about students' thinking, reading, listening, and oral language abilities. While Johni planned to use videotapes and transcripts of second-grade discussions to explore ways of engaging her eighth graders in metacognitive thinking. To foster student ownership in the project, Johni involved her eighth graders in creating and planning ways of studying the second graders' thinking. Their ideas resulted in a host of literacy activities that went far beyond a focus on children's thinking. The second- and eighth-grade students' enthusiasm and interest in each other developed into reciprocally beneficial and meaningful relationships. When we analyzed the data that included student autobiographies, letters exchanged, student interviews and assorted other writings about the project, we realized that what had evolved between elementary and middle-school students were literacy partnerships (Commeyras, Mathis, & Sumner, in press). Now, Georgiana and Johni are in the midst of their second year of cross-classroom research. They continue to study how the interpersonal relationships that students develop in these cross-age literacy partnerships contribute to their engagement in literate activities. A centerpiece of the literacy partnerships is the literature discussions conducted in each classroom on the same children's book. Videotapes of these discussions are exchanged so that second graders can learn about the kinds of questions eighth graders discuss and eighth graders can compare their thinking about the book

with that of their second-grade partners. Other innovations based on ideas generated by the students are being studied as well.

Conclusion

In reflecting on the directions that have evolved in our three years of research, it is apparent that we are addressing a major goal of the NRRC: "to study how to cultivate highly engaged, self-determining readers who are the architects of their own learning" (Alvermann & Guthrie, 1993, p. 2). When student questioning reigns in literature discussions, readers are "architects of their own learning." When second and eighth graders want to communicate with each other by sharing autobiographies, stories, and their questions about literature, they become "highly engaged, self-determining readers."

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